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Beng-Huat, Chua

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CHRISTINE HELLIWELL is a Senior Lecturer in Anthropology in the School of Archaeology and Anthropology at the Australian National University. *Address:* Archaeology and Anthropology, Faculty of Arts, AD Hope Building, Australian National University, Canberra ACT 0200, Australia. [email: Christine.Helliwell@anu.edu.au]

BARRY HINDESS is Professor in the Political Science Program at the Australian National University. *Address:* Political Science Program, Research School of Social Sciences, Australian National University, Canberra ACT 0200, Australia. [email: b.hindess@anu.edu.au]

When difference becomes an instrument of social regulation

CHUA BENG-HUAT

National University of Singapore

The histories of discrimination and exclusion of non-white migrant communities in developed countries of the West have given rise to the following demands: (a) recognition of the different groups' contributions to the respective nation's past; (b) respect for cultural differences of the different groups to be legally recognized and instituted through; (c) 'multiculturalism' as national cultural policy. All these demands can be justified within the liberal democratic promise of social equality and justice. 'Difference', especially ethnic-cultural differences, is thus a code word for the larger issue of redressing historical injustices.

The demands are often resisted. Simplistic arguments against 'multiculturalism' suggest that it undermines national unity which is, supposedly, built on 'shared' values. In reality shared values are insufficient for national unity. On the other hand, value differences between groups do not necessarily lead to national disunity. More sophisticated arguments find common ground within the liberal principle of equality of individuals. This demands that the state and its public policies be 'difference blind' to avoid

privileging or discriminating against marked individuals. This line of argument turns multiculturalism-as-historical-redress on its head. These debates have taxed leading contemporary political philosophers from all shades of liberalism in the last two decades and are far from over.

Now, let us examine a polity in which difference is not suppressed but officially emphasized and incorporated as a 'core' element in the fashioning of public policies.

Singapore is a British postcolony with a multiethnic or multiracial population. The majority population are not descendents of the white British colonizers but ethnic Chinese. The Malays in Singapore, themselves descendents of immigrants from the neighbouring archipelago, are indigenous to the region. They have neither been decimated nor placed in reservations; instead their indigeneity is explicitly recognized and written into the nation's Constitution. South Asians constitute the third visible population group. Their ancestors were brought to Singapore either by the British colonial regime or came voluntarily. Singapore, instead of waiting for the presence of the multiracial population to become a political issue, began its nationhood, in 1965, as a constitutional multiracial nation, with the three visible 'racial' groups – Chinese, Malays and Indians; race instead of ethnicity is the locally preferred and common lexicon. While each of these racial labels homogenizes the linguistic and sub-ethnic differences within the respective groups, the presence of the three racial groups is at the core of public administration.

Multiracialism and its entailed multiculturalism and multi-religiosity are embedded in public policies. Public holidays are allocated equally; two national holidays per group. Since practically all Malays are Muslims, the two Islamic holidays are considered 'Malay' holidays. For similar reason of religion and ethnicity overlap, one holiday each for Hinduism and Buddhism are considered 'Indian' holidays. Finally, the Chinese have two Chinese New Year days. There are four official languages: English, Mandarin, Malay and Tamil, a South Indian language spoken by the majority of Indians in Singapore. English is the primary language of public administration, commerce and education at all levels. Every student must take his/her own ethnic language as a second language, from primary to secondary school. Public housing, in which 90 percent of the population reside, is allocated by quota, proportionally to the size of each of the three racial groups in the nation. Each group is encouraged to develop its own social welfare agencies which are, nevertheless, financially supported by government assistance. Political representation in parliament is guaranteed by quota; 25 percent of the members of parliament are non-Chinese. Non-Chinese are also found in government ministerial ranks. Racial and religious tolerance and harmony are elevated to the level of public good and policed by several legislations and government bodies.

The rigorous maintenance of the formal equality of groups has serious

social, cultural and political consequences. As a general observation, due to the different sizes of the three groups, each public policy or administrative rule unavoidably produces different and unequal consequences among the three groups. For example, the Chinese majority is unable to translate its demographic power into effective political demand in the areas of language and education; Mandarin has effectively the same official status as Tamil, the language of the majority of Indians, the smallest racial group. In this sense, there is a 'minoritization' effect on Chinese language and education. On the other hand, the quota allocation system of public housing severely limits the market for Indian households who need to trade their existing flats, as they are permitted to sell their existing flats to other Indian households only. The unequal results unavoidably create resentments against different public policies. However, as the government treats the unequal effects as the 'costs' to be borne in the interest of racial harmony, it entertains no legal recourse.

Equality and rights of groups also tend to deny equality and rights of individuals. For example, racial harmony is held with such high regard that boundaries between racial groups have become sites of policing and punishment. A person raising a public issue regarding management of race is vulnerable to being charged and potentially imprisoned, under various legislations, for being a 'racial chauvinist' who threatens public peace. The rights and freedom of speech are thus severely circumscribed as one of the ironies of maintaining racial harmony. Morally desirable, racial harmony has thus become both discursive and substantive reasons for an anti-liberal democratic public sphere and polity.

The logic of equality of groups, which embodies the recognition of difference, enables the incumbent government to shift the definition of 'democracy' away from liberalism to a 'communitarian' foundation, where the interest and well-being of each group, culminating in the idea of the national community, are given primacy over the interests and well-being of each individual, the presumption being that without the well-being of the group, there will be no well being for the individual. Complaints that equality and rights of individuals have been violated can be countered thus: equality and rights as foundational political ideas of democracy have not been denied but elevated to the group level. This communitarian ideology has achieved a high level of consensus with the population, in spite of persistent complaints against its anti-democratic ways by liberals, at home and abroad.

A question that arises is what holds the Singaporean nation together if differences among the three racial groups are constantly reiterated and put on display. One of the elements is, of course, the shared desire for racial peace. Another is the ideological construction of the difference between Singapore and its immediate neighbours, who constitute the unnamed enemies in the rhetoric and actual material military preparation for national defence. At another step remove, the 'unity' of the nation is held by the

collapsing of the differences between the three racial groups into a supra category of being 'Asians' and ideologically pitching this category against the 'West'. This ideological move is aided by the banality of the geographical fact that Singapore is in Asia. This makes Singapore an 'Asian' country in which all Asians are 'at home', not 'aliens' nor diasporic, in contrast to Asian populations in the West.

The illustrative Singapore instance shows that a nation state does not have to fear and deny differences in the name of national unity. Neither does it need to embrace multiculturalism with a liberal foundation, which throws up all the contradictions that plague critics and protagonists of multiculturalism in the West. The embodiment of difference into the polity – in political discursive practices and substantive administrative processes – can be relatively successfully, with a corresponding ideological shift away from liberal individualism to group-based or 'collective' discourse. This ideological shift had been the central argument of the 'Asian values' discourse that had been much misrecognized and demonized by western intellectuals as 'veil of authoritarianism'. Furthermore, the same ideological shift also enables an articulation of a 'conservative' democracy, countering the increasingly globally hegemonic equation of democracy with liberalism.

CHUA BENG-HUAT is Professor in the Asia Research Institute and Department of Sociology at the National University of Singapore. *Address:* Department of Sociology, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, National University of Singapore, AS1 #03-06, 11 Arts Link, Singapore 117570. [email: soccbh@nus.edu.sg]